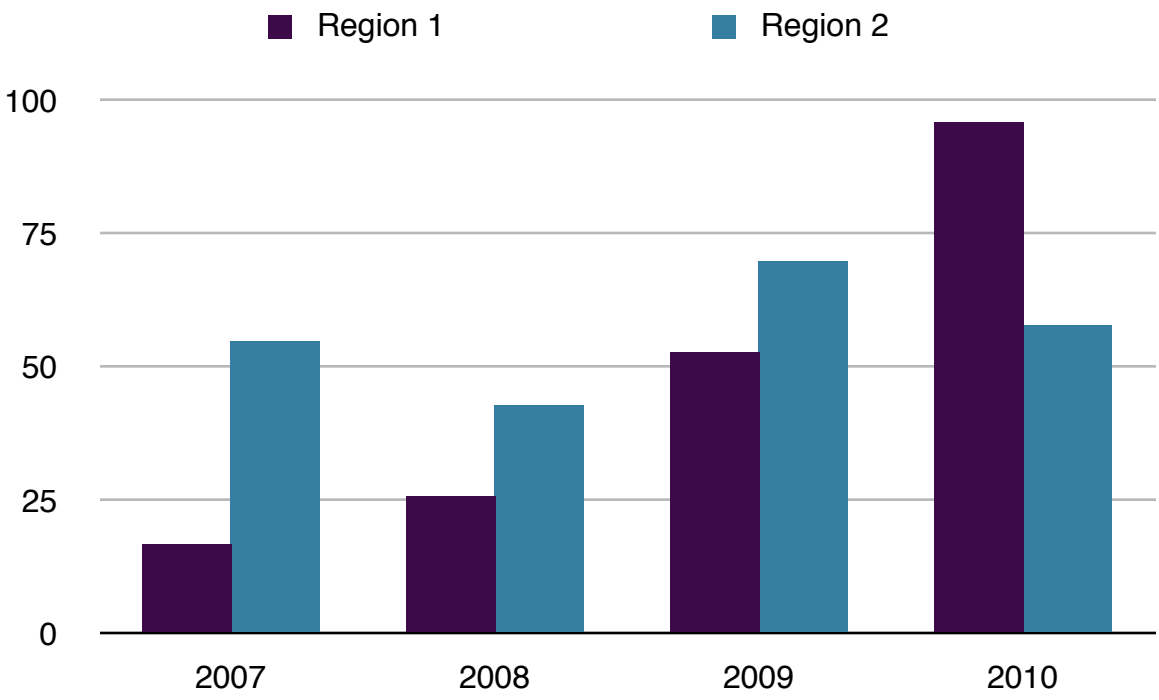

From the New Nation to the New Immigration

In the seventy years between 1820 (the first year immigration statistics were gathered) and 1890, fifteen million people came to the United States. Altogether, some forty million came between 1790 and 1930. This is one of the greatest population movements in history. The flow of immigrants was not, however, a steady predictable movement but occurred in an uneven fashion. In fact, the period from 1790 to around 1840 was one of relatively low immigration levels. From 1821 to 1840 only 744,000 immigrants came to America, but then from 1841 to 1850 another 1.7 million arrived.

War always discourages immigration. The American Revolution (1775-82) was followed by a long cycle of European wars beginning in 1793 during the French Revolution and extending through the age of

Napoleon to 1815. The War of 1812 (1812-15) between England and the United States was an additional inhibiting factor.

The people of the new United States were generally sympathetic to immigrants in the early years of nationhood, seeing their country as a place of refuge from the oppression of Europe. The Constitution barely touched on immigration and even then only in the context of the foreign slave trade. The Naturalization Act of 1790 required only a two-year residence as a requirement for citizenship.

The French Revolution, however, had a divisive effect on American politics, and the Naturalization Act of 1795 raised the residence requirement to five years. The Alien Act of 1798 raised it to fourteen years. This act expired in 1800, however, and the requirement was again reduced to five years. In the absence of large-scale immigration, the issue attracted relatively little attention until the advent of the “Old” immigration in the 1840s and 1850s.

In the absence of large-scale immigration, however, powerful social forces were at work creating the conditions necessary for major population shifts. Immigration usually results from a combination of “push” and “pull” factors. The “push” factors encouraged people to leave their homes and the “pull” factors encouraged them to come to America. The “push” factors repel and the “pull” factors attract.

The important push factors were a dramatic population increase in Europe coupled with economic need, chiefly the displacement of

agricultural workers. There were, of course, other factors as well, including political, religious, and ethnic oppression which helped push people out of Europe.

There were also the factors which pulled people to the United States. The United States was the largest and most advanced of the world's underdeveloped countries. It was, in fact, a vast labor market with political and religious freedom along with economic opportunity and upward mobility. The relative strength of the push and pull factors changed over time and place, but their combined effects provided a powerful impetus to immigration.

The effect of the push and pull factors was strengthened by technological factors as well. The industrial revolution was shrinking the world. The railroads of America and western Europe made long-distance travel ever more possible, and the telegraph carried information farther and faster than ever before. Travel between Europe and America benefited from more and more efficient sailing ships, and the transition to steamboats in the 1860s cut costs and reduced travel time significantly. A four-week voyage was typically lowered to two weeks.

From the time of the American Revolution to the first surge in immigration in the 1840s, the United States had become less diverse. After several generations, descendants of the early immigrants had been assimilated. Foreign-language newspapers declined, and English was increasingly used in ethnic churches. America came increasingly under

the sway of the dominant Protestant Anglo-American culture. But, although America was becoming more homogeneous, it was not becoming more tolerant.

Indeed, most Americans in the 1830s expected newcomers to conform to their dominant culture. Most African Americans were slaves, and free blacks were regarded with suspicion and occupied an uneasy place between slavery and freedom. Native Americans were being compelled to settle in the west beyond the pale of American civilization.

The large-scale immigration that began in the mid-1840s is often referred to as the "Old" immigration which was followed by the "New" immigration of the period from the mid-1890s to 1930. Another phase, which we can call the "Newest" immigration, began around 1965 and continues to the present.

The decade of the 1840s was a grim one for many parts of Europe. Often called the "hungry 40s," the decade saw many crop failures, the most catastrophic being the Irish potato famine. There was also general political unrest in Europe which culminated in the failed revolutions of 1848. These circumstances caused a dramatic surge in the levels of immigration.

Over eighty percent of these immigrants came from only a few regions of western Europe—Ireland, England (including Scotland and Wales), and Germany, which was in the mid-nineteenth century still a group of various German-speaking states ranging in size from Prussia to

tiny duchies. Significant numbers, however, also came from Scandinavian countries, Canada, and France. Those who came to America from England, Scotland, and Wales have been called the "forgotten immigrants" because they tended to blend easily into America society with little social disruption.

This was certainly not true, however, of the Germans and the Irish. Differences in language, social custom, and religion caused difficulties. Although some of these immigrants, particularly the Germans and Scandinavians, showed an aptitude for farming, most immigrants flocked into cities. The Irish were most numerous in the eastern cities, particularly Boston, while Germans ranged farther west. Although numerous in such eastern cities as Baltimore, they also created a midwestern triangle formed by St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati.

Immigrants were increasingly associated by Americans with two social realities they profoundly distrusted: cities and the industrial revolution. The earlier so-called "walking cities" disappeared as the transportation revolution enabled the wealthy to move into the new suburbs. Immigrants then flooded into the urban centers which were often transformed into overpopulated, unhealthful, and poverty-stricken slums. They also sought employment where it was the easiest to find—unskilled jobs in America's expanding industrial system.

Although immigrant labor was badly needed (not without reason were the immigrants referred to as those "who built America") and

although most struggled diligently to better their condition, they were, nevertheless, often blamed for the desperate circumstances in which they sometimes found themselves.

Into this already volatile relationship, another factor, equally disruptive, intruded: religious difference. America had always been an overwhelmingly Protestant country. In 1790, Catholics constituted only one percent of the population (around 25,000 persons) and over half of them lived in Maryland. By 1850, however, they constituted 7.5% of the population; their total number had grown to 23,000,000.

The result of this major social change was the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment called nativism. Nativism was expressed politically by the American Party, popularly called Know-Nothings because of the members' habit of claiming no knowledge of the party when asked about it. The strength of this party peaked in the 1840s and 1850s fueled by a number of social conflicts stemming from religious and cultural differences. Even the nation's emerging public-school system, one of the most significant reforms of the nineteenth century, was drawn into controversy. While its defenders characterized the public-school system as nondenominational, Catholics perceived it as nondenominationally Protestant and claimed that their faith was often criticized by Protestant teachers. Catholics created their own parochial school system to educate their children in an affirmative, Catholic environment.

The degree of alienation that existed between Protestants and Catholics is shown by the fact that the second-most popular book in nineteenth-century America (Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852] was number one) was the *Awful Disclosures* (1836) by "Maria Monk," a spurious expose of sexual immorality among Catholic religious. It sold 300,000 copies. The social tensions triggered by immigration peaked in the mid-1850s and declined later in the decade.

Immigration figures dipped sharply after 1855 for a number of reasons, including the growing political tensions over slavery, the Panic of 1857, improving conditions in Europe, and, finally, the Civil War. Immigrant totals did not match those of 1854 until 1873 before declining again because of the economic difficulties beginning with the Panic of 1873 and the ensuing depression. Another peak was reached in 1882, followed by an uneven decline to a low in the late 1890s—another period of economic difficulty. By this time, however, the era of the "Old" immigration had ended.

The period from 1860 to the late 1890s did not have the stark drama of the 1840s and the 1850s. Nevertheless, this period witnessed a number of significant developments. The Civil War contributed to a sharp decline in immigration. Only 91,000 immigrants came to America in 1861. Immigrants were somewhat overrepresented in the armies of both the North and the South. In the North they were 18 percent of the population and 22 percent of the army, while in the South the figures

were 4 percent and 5 to 10 percent respectively. Over 95 percent of all immigrants served in the Union army. Although most immigrants probably opposed slavery, immigrant enlistments came more from economic incentive than from political conviction. Immigrant service in the Union army may have helped reduce tensions and weaken nativist sentiment.

In the period after the Civil War, natives and immigrants reached an uneasy accommodation. The ideal of homogeneity remained strong. Immigrants were expected to conform to American cultural norms. Immigrants, for their part, resisted these expectations, particularly with respect to religious traditions. The Irish were particularly tenacious in this regard, and they paid a price in ongoing hostility. Even so, the mere passage of time brought its inevitable degree of assimilation. The percentage of foreign-born to native-born dropped nationwide from 1860 to 1890. The impact of the “Old” immigration stabilized. Soon, however, the advent of the “New” immigration disturbed this relative equilibrium.